

Reflections on “Northern Squalor” and Sovereignty

by Dakota Erutse

“**WITH ALL OF** this government activity in the North since 1945 the possibility of any legal claim against Canadian Arctic sovereignty is now remote,” wrote Cambridge scholar and former Yukon administrator David Judd in 1969.¹ “The principal issue of 1879 and of 1945 will no longer spur Ottawa to northern action; the social problems will now be the chief impulse. Canada cannot afford northern squalor again.”²

This piece of probity, as it were, did not age well. But if I am to take seriously the menaces of Donald Trump and the adulation of his admirers, I prefer Jody Wilson-Raybould’s approach as a responsible consumer of the news: “To include the experience of Indigenous Peoples in pushing back on threats to sovereignty.”³ Moreover, I prefer to lean into the ways of Justin Trudeau in these uncertain times—by reflecting, reflecting again, and then reflecting some more.

All I can say now is that American hawkishness does not upset me nearly as much as northern squalor. My feeling on the matter is fair when you consider that I am a born and bred northerner: squalor is closer to my reality than a perceived derogation of Canadian sovereignty.

In fact, northerners—if they know their history—will already be acquainted with what Mr. Judd called the “casual United States attitude.”⁴ I should defer to actual historians on this point and stick to my squalor.

How can one describe the general characteristics of this northern squalor? I, myself, would not have used the term, nearing as it does along prejudicial lines towards degeneracy, decadence, and sweeping generalization; and yet what a refreshing early treatment in the literature over

the genius loci of this corner of Canada, so contrary to the gazing abstractedness of contemporary northern policy.

One is almost history-bound to form a mental picture of the North as constituting a volley of missionaries, fur traders, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, all freely discharged upon a timid race of natives. This picture would be clearer, to me at least, than the following: “Insufficient physical and social infrastructure has hindered opportunities for growth and prosperity in the region.” That was the Government of Canada in 2019.⁵

Now, of course, the federal government has caught a second wind in Mark Carney, and the unifying principle of a federation is almost palpable. The Carney government has found the terms and objects of its activity in the urge toward diversion from American hawkishness and jealousy, née Trump. Its first government bill, titled the One Canadian Economy Act, is a triumph of federal assertion over a long procession of values considered basic, so far as I could ascertain, to any sovereign government. These values are read in the bill’s second purpose, which is “to enhance Canada’s prosperity, national security, economic security, national defence and national autonomy . . .”

For those of us living in northern squalor, we may be reassured by a particular line of reasoning as noted in the bill’s second part—which itself is titled the *Building Canada Act*—specifically as noted in its preamble: “Whereas Parliament recognizes that it is in the interests of Canada’s economy, sovereignty and security, including its energy security, to urgently advance projects throughout Canada, including in the North, that are in the national interest . . .” Certainly, in the Northwest Territories, Premier R.J. Simpson has put on a warm display of sentiment in response to developments arising out of this legislation. “The Northwest Territories is ready,” he said.

As for me, I tend to get caught up in those strange philosophical notions around extension when I consider a government whose head office is nearer to the American border than to the Arctic Ocean, whose outlook in this legislation is gazing northward but for a moment—George Berkeley, I bid thee, because I forget, was it Hylas or Philonous who said the drooping colour in the sky during a sunset is not a substance on its own, not a material thing free from the mind? I am peevishly conscious of a material reality, that is, and I perceive it as real. My opinion is that by this legislation, we are to perceive “the North” as an extension of Canada, but only to remind ourselves in the abstract of the objects of sovereignty, that the invisible hand of a democratic government is a mere extension of two material things observed together—people and land. This approach seems patently self-evident because there is simply no land to observe looking south: it’s all American.

Well, there is plenty of land elsewhere in Canada; one simply has to look up, which is what this government is doing. But to what end?

In other words, the North is an extension of Canada insofar as it extends the aims of government, not *Carney’s* aims and objectives exactly, but the abstract nature of government which we all ought to perceive as a given over this land, if we are Canadians. Mr. Judd was right, then, in my view, to state “social problems” as *the* priority of note over the North. And now writers like Dr. Jessica Penney are right, too, to note the ill consideration for “social conditions” in the Arctic in this context of national governmental interests. I am joining their chorus. I predict, in pure, unoriginal fashion, that there will be writers long after Mr. Judd, Dr. Penney, and me, who will say again, “What about the people of the North?” Furthermore, I am not yet aware of any society’s well-being which is founded purely in the assertion of sovereignty, as though it were the honest result of good intentions. I thought the term for such a lie was colonialism?

Footnotes

1. Judd, David. “Canada’s Northern Policy: Retrospect and Prospect.” *Canada’s Changing North*, edited by William C. Wonders, McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1971, pp. 338–350.
2. Ibid., p. 347.
3. Wilson-Raybould, Jody. “Indigenous Peoples Have Been Confronted with Trump-like Leaders for Centuries. Here’s What We’ve Learned.” *Toronto Star*, 29 Mar. 2025, www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/indigenous-peoples-have-been-confronted-with-trump-like-leaders-for-centuries-heres-what-weve-learned/article_2d759ade-0367-11f0-b628-a75fb188c003.html. Accessed 4 April 2025.
4. Judd, p. 340
5. Government of Canada, Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs. *Canada’s Arctic and Northern Policy Framework*, 2019, p. 8.

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